DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 484 PS 019 568

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TITLE Young Children's Response to Criticism: Self-Conceptions and Trait Thinking.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Criticism; *Inferences; *Kindergarten Children; Primary Education; Self Concept; *Self Esteem; *Student Motivation; *Teacher Influence
IDENTIFIERS Moral Reasoning

ABSTRACT

A total of 107 children of 5 and 6 years participated in interactive scenarios in which mastery experiences were pitted against external criticism. The 39 percent of children whose positive assessments were undermined by the criticism were more likely than other children to make broad negative inferences from specific information. A large proportion of these children interpreted their performance as reflecting negatively on important traits, including their goodness. In addition, these children were more likely than others to make stable and global judgments concerning the goodness of others. This study provides evidence suggesting that children who have just started school have evaluative self-conceptions that are motivationally relevant. The study also provides evidence that the way in which these children think about general goodness is related to their motivational responses in the face of criticism. Finally, the study provides evidence that at least some children of this age are capable of processing information in the achievement context in active and highly sophisticated ways. At its broadest level, the study suggests that self-conceptions and motivation are related early in development, but the domain of relevant self-conceptions may change as children mature. (RH)

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Symposium: Self-Conceptions and Motivational Development
SRCD April 1991

Young Children's Response to Criticism: Self-Conceptions and Trait Thinking

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It has been argued that young children do not have motivationally relevant self-conceptions and are therefore immune to motivational vulnerability. In order to address this issue 107 5- and 6-year-olds participated in interactive scenarios in which mastery experiences were pitted against external criticism. The 39 percent of children whose own positive assessments were undermined by the criticism were more likely than other children to make broad negative inferences from specific information. Specifically, a large proportion of these children interpreted their performance as reflecting negatively upon important traits, including their goodness. In addition, these children were more likely than others to make stable and global judgments concerning the goodness of others. The results provide evidence of motivationally meaningful individual differences in young children's self-judgments and trait thinking.

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Symposium: Self-Conceptions and Motivational Development

Young Children's Response to Criticism: Self-Conceptions and Trait Thinking

Do young children have motivationally relevant self-conceptions? Although they show motivational resilience in many academic tasks, recent evidence (Hebert & Dweck, 1985; Smiley, 1989) suggests that kindergartners and preschoolers can indeed experience motivational vulnerability when presented with clear cases of failure on familiar tasks. Some young children show reactions that are highly similar to the maladaptive response seen in older children (see Diener & Dweck, 1978), while others respond in a mastery oriented fashion. Do these young children, like their older counterparts, differ in the self-conceptions they bring to achievement tasks? Or is it the case, as has been previously argued, that young children lack relevant self-conceptions and do not have the cognitive capacity to call important aspects of themselves into question?

Where does one look to understand the motivationally relevant self-conceptions and trait notions held by young children? One might expect to find such conceptions within a domain that is highly familiar to them. One might also expect early trait notions to be relatively broad and undifferentiated (See Benenson & Dweck,1986; Heller & Berndt, 1981). One domain which satisfies both of these criteria is that of general goodness and badness. Children are likely to have received a lot of information concerning what makes a person good or bad, and they may use this information to make sense of their own behavior and the behavior of others. Instead of having fully developed formulations of specific social or intellectual traits, young children may use their ideas about global goodness or badness to encompass what older children and adults would consider to be a variety of different traits.

In order to examine whether or not young children actually do have notions about goodness and badness that are related to their achievement motivation, a special procedure was devised. The subjects, 107 kindergartners, were individually interviewed. The children used toy people

to act out stories presented by an experimenter. In each story, the theme was the same--the child pretended to create a product as a nice surprise for the teacher, but just before presenting the product, the child noticed that something was missing. In one story children were told:"You spend a lot of time painting a picture of a family to give to your teacher. You pick out colors you think are nice and carefully draw each person. As you are about to give it to your teacher you say to yourself, 'Uh oh, one of the kids has no feet.' But you worked really hard on the picture and want to give it to her. You say, 'Teacher, here's a picture for you.'"

In the control condition, the story stops there, but in the other stories a teacher enters the scene and expresses disapproval. In this story, for example, they were told: "There are no feet on that child. That's not what I call drawing people the right way. I'm disappointed in you." In this way, mastery experiences were pitted against a response of teacher criticism

The other two stories involved making a house with no windows and writing out numbers from one to ten but forgetting the number "8". After hearing each story children were asked to respond to the experience. Specifically, they were asked to rate their "work", and how they felt about important aspects of themselves. In addition, children's general beliefs about goodness and badness were investigated.

Results from the control condition made it clear that children almost uniformly gave their work high ratings when they were presented with a mastery experience in the absence of criticism. In contrast, after receiving criticism, some children gave themselves neutral or low ratings, while others maintained their high ratings. Children were divided into two groups based on this distinction. The 39 percent of children whose judgments were undermined by the adult's criticism were categorized as low product raters, and the 61 percent of children who maintained their high ratings were categorized as high product raters. Low product raters responded much like helpless children in terms of their affect, task choices, and lack of constructive problem solving strategies.

Subjects in the study were asked to make judgments about their abilities and traits after acting out the scenarios. Specifically, children evaluated their task ability, intelligence, goodness and niceness. Figure 1 depicts the percentage of children who expressed negative self-judgments in response to each of the ability and trait questions. As can be seen from this

figure, a large proportion of low product raters interpreted their performance as reflecting negatively on the way they thought about themselves. More than half the low product raters reported negative feelings about their smartness or goodness. These children were equally likely to blame these general traits as they were to indict more specific abilities.

Many low product raters imagined that after they were criticized, others would make negative judgments of themselves and their work. Many expected their parents to respond critically (for example, thinking the child is a "sissy"or saying "that's bad work"). They were also more more likely to express expectations of punishment than were high product raters (for example, expecting parents to send them to their room). These low product raters often felt that they deserved such negative responses. (See Table 1 for a summary of these results.)

These results indicate that low product raters were more likely than other children to make global negative judgments after they had been criticized. Did they also think about relevant psychological conceptions in different ways? Specifically, did they think about their general goodness and badness differently? The results of this study suggest that they did. Low product raters were more likely to view negative behaviors as reflecting something stable about a person. It is possible that these children saw goodness and badness as fixed traits, just as many helpless older children view intelligence as a fixed trait. It may be that children who have rigid conceptions of important traits find each instance of failure to be diagnostic of these traits, and therefore highly threatening.

Low product raters were also more likely than high product raters to view poor academic performance as being evidence that a person is "bad." For these children, negative feedback may have a global meaning, resulting in greater susceptibility to maladaptive motivational responses. (See table 2 for summary).

This study provides evidence of a link between young children's motivation and way they think about goodness. By examining the responses of individual children, we can gain insight into some of the specific issues with which they are concerned. These individual responses suggest that children seemed to think about how to meet their goals, and how to interpret the information they had received.

A concern for self-expression can be seen in the following exchange between a boy and his imaginary teacher:

Subject: Teacher, this is no ordinary house. I made this so it doesn't have any windows.

Teacher: That's not a real house. I want a real house. I want an ordinary house.

Subject: Well I want to make my own house and I want it not ordinary!

Children also expressed concern with winning approval. One boy said to the imaginary teacher, "I wanted to make a little family and all I wanted to do was try my best to make you feel happy and I just want you to like me."

Children in the study seemed to be struggling with the question of what makes someone good or bad. Does working hard to do something nice make one good, and does receiving criticism for a flawed product mean that one is bad? An example of this struggle is seen in the role play of one boy who located these different points of view within different parents:

Mother: Hello. What are you sad about?

Subject: I gave my teacher some numbers and I skipped the number 8 and now I'm feeling sad.

Mother: Well, there's one thing that can cheer you up.

Subject: What?

Mother: If you really tell your teacher that you tried your best, she wouldn't be mad at you. We're not mad [at him], aren't [sic] we?

Father: Oh [yes] we are! [in a very angry voice]

Of the children who concluded that their failure meant they were bad, there was often a struggle to make sense of these feelings. For example one girl said, "The legs are missing. I don't feel real good about it. It didn't have legs and my teacher hated it. I don't like it because she hated it. When she hated it I felt like my artwork wasn't really mine. It was another person's."

The results of this study raise an important question: does the tendency of children to become motivationally helpless change over the

course of development? From previous research we know that there are contexts in which younger children are less motivationally vulnerable (see for example, Parsons & Ruble, 1977). This may be due in part to less stringent performance standards on the part of young children. There may be, however, ways in which young children are *more* vulnerable than older children. The present research suggests that for young children, negative outcomes are often associated with negative feelings about global aspects of the self. Further development and differentiation of trait concepts may allow older children to compartmentalize different aspects of the self, and therefore see failure or criticism as implicating more specific aspects of the self rather than the self as a whole. In addition, young children may be more willing to accept negative judgments of their own work (even if these judgments conflict with other sources of feedback), due to a special concern with social reinforcement, and a less developed understanding of other potential standards of judgment (see Stipek, 1984). More research is needed in order to determine the precise nature of developmental change in the tendency towards helplessness, and how this tendency is related to the concerns children have within different achievement contexts.

In summary, this study provides evidence suggesting that children just starting school have motivationally relevant evaluative self-conceptions. This study also provides evidence that the way in which these children think about general goodness is related to their motivational responses in the face of criticism. Finally, this study provides evidence that at least some children of this age are capable of processing information within the achievement context in active and highly sophisticated ways. At the broadest level, this study suggests that self-conceptions and motivation are related early in development, but that the domain of relevant self-conceptions may change as children mature.

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Figure 1.
Self-ratings of High and Low Product Raters

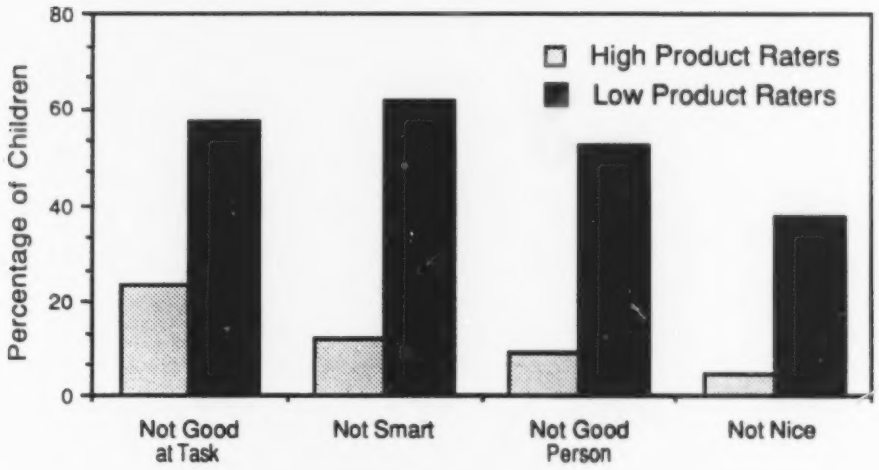

Table 1.
Percentage of High and Low Product Raters who Expected or Endorsed Negative Responses

	Product Raters		
	High	Low	
Expected Negative Parental Response	24.6	47.5	$X^2(1) = 5.84$ $p < .025$
Expected Punishment	4.6	16.6	$X^2(1) = 4.37$ $p < .05$
Endorsed Negative Teacher Responses	21.5	41.0	$X^2(1) = 4.51$ $p < .05$

Table 2.
Percentage of High and Low Product Raters Endorsing the View that (a) Negative Behavior Patterns are likely to be Maintained and (b) that Academic Mistakes Reflect Badness

Table 2(a)

	Product Raters	
	High	Low
Yes (Always Bad)	24.6	50.0
No (Not Always Bad)	75.4	50.0

Table 2(b)

	Product Raters	
	High	Low
Yes (Bad)	18.5	47.6
No (Not Bad)	81.5	52.7